

lift up (carry the love) by darlingargents

Series: [Ladies Bingo 2017/2018 \[9\]](#)

Category: [Stranger Things \(TV 2016\)](#)

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Summary:

This is not exactly how Max would've wanted their first date to go.

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Author's Note:

For the Ladies Bingo square **Race Against Time**. Which is very relevant to me right now as I try to complete as many squares as I can before the deadline. Why did I wait five months to start? We'll never know.

Anyway. This is set probably about a year after the main events of season 2. Title is from Without You by Oh Wonder. Also: did arcade games like this exist in the time of the show? Who knows! Not me, that's for damn sure.

“I don’t understand,” El says for the millionth time.

Max honestly thought she would’ve lost patience and smashed the machine by now, but luckily El just looks annoyed. Max patiently guides her hands to the controls. Again. “Just like this.” She demonstrates how to move the controls, when to press. How to win.

El’s brows furrow in concentration, and she tries again. She lands one hit and then dies. Max resists the urge to bury her face in her hands.

This is not exactly how she would’ve wanted their first date to go.

She’d planned on the arcade being just a short stopover on their way to the movie, and then dinner. But El had gotten attached, had wanted to win — and now the movie’s half over. Max doesn’t really mind — she wasn’t that excited about the movie anyway, and she had been planning on buying the tickets there, so no real loss — but she kind of wishes that El was actually having fun instead of plugging away at a game that she’s not winning at.

El pushes in another coin, stubborn as ever. Max leans against the machine next to El’s to watch.

This attempt is more successful, and she even manages a few points

before dying.

“Should we try a different game?” Max suggests. El shrugs, so Max gently takes her wrist and guides — not pulls, she’s learned her lesson by now — over to another game. This one is a puzzle game, where you have to find the pattern and solve the puzzle before the clock runs out, and the levels get harder and harder.

They end up working together on this one, talking over options and solutions, and they get pretty far. The time they have to solve each puzzle slowly gets shorter, and by the tenth level, Max’s heart is pounding as El’s eyes search the screen desperately for the pattern.

She solves the level with two and a half seconds to spare.

They lose on the fourteenth level, and this time, El doesn’t look upset or disappointed. She just smiles at Max, who feels her heart stutter in her chest.

El entwines her fingers with Max’s, and they stroll out of the arcade. It’s later than Max had thought — the sun is fully down — and she looks at her watch in confusion.

“*Shit*,” Max says, and starts to run down the street. El keeps up easily.

“What?”

“Our reservation,” she says between breaths. “If we don’t get there in the next ten minutes, it’s cancelled. And it’s a really busy night. We won’t be able to eat.”

They make it to the restaurant in eight and a half minutes. The waitress looks a little surprised at their red faces and shortness of breath, but guides them to their table without saying anything.

Max watches El as they wait for their drinks. El is looking around the restaurant around her. It’s not the fanciest restaurant in town, but it’s fairly nice, and Max can afford it without having to spend ages saving up the money from her job at the skate shop.

And considering it serves waffles any time of the day, Max is pretty sure El is going to love it.

When they finally get back to El's house after dinner — they'd walked the whole way, fingers entwined, Max feeling so happy that she thought her heart would burst — El's dad is waiting in the door. He's not holding a shotgun physically, but Max can sense its presence if he gets the slightest idea that his little girl was mistreated.

With that in mind, she plans to say goodbye and walk home with nothing further. They'll see each other at school in a couple days anyway. It's not a big deal to wait until El's dad isn't watching.

Apparently El doesn't have the same concerns. She takes Max's hands and says, "Can I kiss you?"

Max has a moment to think *oh god, her dad's gonna kill me* before her traitorous body nods for her and El is leaning in.

It's not their first kiss. The honour of that moment goes to a week ago, in the forest alone, with no one around but them; it had been a half-desperate and frighteningly intense moment. This one is softer, and shorter; barely more than a soft brush of their lips together.

El pulls back and smiles at Max before trekking up to her front door. Her dad is glaring at Max so intently that he doesn't notice El until she's standing right next to him. She touches his arm, and he starts before smiling down at her and gesturing her inside.

He gives Max one last glare — an *if I hear one bad thing about this date, I'm going to hunt you down* look — and follows her.

Max doesn't mind. She smiles, giddy, and touches her lips softly.

She's still smiling the whole way home.